

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH REAR ADMIRAL PATRICK DRISCOLL,
U.S. NAVY, DEPUTY CHIEF, MNF-I STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS DIVISION, VIA
TELECONFERENCE FROM IRAQ TIME: 10:00 A.M. EDT DATE: THURSDAY, JULY 31, 2008

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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA): All right,
sir. Looks like two out of the seven on board we got --

ADM. DRISCOLL: Okay. What I thought I'd do is just very briefly --
(audio break) -- today, and then I know you've got lots of questions.

The situation on the ground, from a security point of view, has been
improving, as I'm sure you've noticed in the press. We've been talking about it
quite a bit. But security incidents, violent incidents are down -- lowest level
since 2004.

We're currently involved in a large operation up in Diyala, near the
Diyala River Valley. The main objective there is the pursuit of al Qaeda --
(audio break) -- them from sanctuaries, to remove them from their hideouts
there, and continue to keep them off balance. It's an Iraqi-planned and -led
operation, with coalition forces in support. And it involves about 30,000
troops and with -- with key enablers. And it's been under way for a day or two.
And so far it's going very well.

Obviously pretty tough conditions up there, those guys out there in
full body armor in 127-degree heat -- working through those palm groves is a
tough slog. But so far it's been fairly successful. We're just getting into it.
But they've detained about 30, 35 al Qaeda right now, and discovered a bunch of
weapons caches as well.

As you know, operations are ongoing in places like Sadr City and Basra
and Amarah, mostly by the Iraqi security forces, and they've been very
successful.

Additionally operations in Mosul continue. We can talk about that
a little bit later as well. Mosul is a piece of valuable real estate for al
Qaeda. They want to hold on to Mosul, because it's their entryway to Syria.
And it facilitates a lot of flow of foreign fighters and money to finance al
Qaeda.

And so they're trying to hold on up there. But the coalition, in
combination with the Iraqi security forces, have been hammering them pretty hard
there for the last three months.

And I think I'll stop there and then let you ask some questions.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much.

Grim, you were first online. So why don't you get us started?

Q Certainly.

Admiral, the e-mail they sent around said you would be willing to talk about the Iraqi elections. Are you still prepared to talk about that?

ADM. DRISCOLL: Absolutely.

(Cross talk.)

Q I have a question.

ADM. DRISCOLL: Okay, go ahead.

Q Well, the question is, we've seen that the militant branch of the Sadrist trend, Jaish al-Mahdi, has fallen off in importance in the last few months, since I left. I was there in March, is when I left.

Do you think that the Sadrist political element is still going to do as well as was being projected, in the provincial elections when they come around?

ADM. DRISCOLL: You know, it's hard to predict how they're going to do. We're kind of taking a wait-and-see approach, just like everybody else, you know, much like our elections in the United States. But you know, just to give you a sense of the strength of Jaish al-Mahdi, and really I would term it more as the Sadr trend, because the Sadr trend is Sadr's political arm. And they're the ones that are going to be involved in the election.

And so what Sadr has chosen to do post-Sadr City operations is transform his organization into a political group, if you will, and has said that for the most part, he's going to disavow violence. And so his party is working, just like the other political parties now, to gain support in order to compete in the election.

And that's a huge step forward in this process for the new Iraq here, because we have people that were former irreconcilables joining the process and engaging in the democratic process. And as you know, you know, that's the key to being successful in this counterinsurgency fight.

Q Thank you, Admiral. That was something that was just starting to develop, when I was leaving. And I just wondered how it was carrying on. I'm glad to hear it's going that way.

MR. HOLT: All right.

Scott.

Q Yeah, hi, Admiral. Thanks for taking the time today. Hey, here in the States we're seeing all kinds of reports that the security situation is improving there. MSNBC says 15 of 18 political benchmarks have been met. Washington Post had an article saying the leader of al Qaeda in Iraq might have fled to Afghanistan. And we have candidates talking about shifting brigades and

all kinds of forces to Afghanistan while drawing down in Iraq over the next 16 months. What effect will shifting forces to Afghanistan have in Iraq? Is it a viable thing? Is it something that's dangerous to talk about? What are your thoughts?

ADM. DRISCOLL: Well, I don't think it's dangerous to talk about. I think there's one common thread. If you've listened carefully to all the folks, the leaders that have been here and talking -- General Petraeus, Ambassador Crocker, the prime minister, Dr. al-Dabbagh, who I was speaking with a couple of days ago -- all talk about conditions-based. So, you know, you have time horizon discussion. You have shifting troops, and obviously we just completed returning the last combat brigade back to the States.

Future, you know, drawdowns, as General Petraeus said, are going to be conditions-based. And what does that mean? Well, he's -- he's going to make an assessment, a continuous assessment of conditions on the ground, and hopefully the vector will -- will stay in the direction it is right now in that security incidents are down and the democratic process is moving along. But he's going to take a look at the conditions-based. And you know, we're going to make sure that we don't give back any gains that we've achieved so far and fought for, but we realize that, you know, the Iraqis now are more and more in the lead of this process and require a little less support.

Q Can I follow up to that?

MR. HOLT: Sure. Go ahead.

ADM. DRISCOLL: Sure. Please.

Q Yeah. I understand -- I've even written about the conditions-based commonality between the parties and all the different people involved. I guess what I'm looking for is what kind of benchmarks should the average American be looking for as measurables for success in Iraq that would tell the average American, yeah, it's okay; the conditions are -- (inaudible) -- to move on to Afghanistan.

ADM. DRISCOLL: Well, I think a couple of things are good indicators that we're continuing to track in the right direction.

One is the continued successful pursuit of al Qaeda. That's -- that's a key security issue that we can't take our eye off and got to continue to focus on.

Another one be -- would be the -- the structured continued process of turning over security for provinces to the Iraqi government. That would be a good thing to watch, and we're making good progress on that. As you know, Qadisiyah was recently turned over.

Another one is, you know, watch the election process and see how that develops. That's very encouraging, the progress we're seeing right now. Five hundred and sixty-five voter registration centers are open -- people are registering to vote as we speak -- and that process moving along. The -- the Council of Representatives is going to go into a special session on Sunday to address elections law, and we're seeing this young democracy struggle with some tough issues and try to solve them. So I think that's a key indicator, too, of, you know, how security and stability is progressing.

Q Great. Thanks.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

Marisa. (Pause.) Marisa, you still with us?

Q Yes. Can you hear me?

ADM. DRISCOLL: Yes. Yes, ma'am.

Q Okay. Hi, Admiral. Marisa Cochrane with the Institute for the Study of War. I'm interested to see how concerned you are about the return of special groups and Jaish al-Mahdi leaders from Iran, and what measures you are taking now to prevent any attempts by special groups to increase violence as a result of such returns, particularly with provincial elections coming up and with discussions now of a coalition drawdown.

ADM. DRISCOLL: Okay. Well, first, you know, we're kind of taking a wait-and-see attitude towards what special groups are going to do. We do have indications that, you know, in Basra, in Sadr City and in Amarah, when the Iraqi security forces went into those places, special groups' leaders, special groups' troops fled and went to Iran. Many of them did. We know that they're receiving training and funding there, and they're taking a wait-and-see approach. And so we will see what -- what develops as -- as time goes on. They're -- you know, as far as them coming back and disrupting the elections, you know, that would almost -- you know, as you can speculate a little bit, that would almost be a negative in terms of bringing bad press to -- to their effort. They -- they, as part of the Sadr trend, would want to, you know, win as many elections as they could.

And the people are by and large rejecting the violence, whether it's al Qaeda or Special Groups, this indiscriminate violence that's killing innocent Iraqis. The Iraqis have really out of hand rejected that and are not supporting any elements that really participate in that.

Q Could I just follow up?

MR. HOLT: Okay, go ahead.

Q Have you seen any indications of a return thus far? Or do you still see that Special Groups and JAM are in a wait-and-hold pattern?

ADM. DRISCOLL: We've got, you know, we're certainly looking, the Iraqi security forces are looking for that return and, you know, perhaps the associated spike with violent attacks, from those areas I mentioned earlier. Haven't seen a lot of it yet but we're, you know, waiting and anticipating. There will be some effort to come back in.

You've got to remember that these folks are not only, you know, anti-coalition and anti-government. They're also criminals and they survive by intimidating and extorting money from the average Iraqi. And they've got to make a living.

And so a lot of their former fortune and wealth came from places like Sadr City where they would, you know, impose their special taxes, in order for people to get heating oil and cooking oil and gas to run their automobiles. And down in Basra, they were stealing the oil and things like that.

So they're going to be, you know, hard-pressed to come back. And there are a lot of people that are happy with what's going on in those areas right now; happy with the Iraqi police, happy with the Iraqi army in those places and the return to normalcy. So it's going to be an interesting process, if and when they come back.

Q Thank you so much.

MR. HOLT: Okay, DJ.

Q Yes, sir.

I've been looking at the reorganization of the Iraqi army and national police. It looks like they're forming another division in South Baghdad and absorbing the two Kurdish divisions. The national police are absorbing the emergency response brigades, which means they're growing to roughly the size of the objective counterinsurgency force.

Could you expand on the reorganization and expansion of those two forces?

ADM. DRISCOLL: Well, they are still in the process of expanding. Right now in approximate numbers, the ISF total is about 580,000; the Iraqi police, about 380,000. And the Iraqi army is at about 200,000.

Their stated goal is, by the middle of next year, about 660,000 Iraqi security forces for their counterterrorism force, if you will.

I don't have specifics for you in terms of how they're going to integrate the national police and the Kurdish brigades. I think that's -- the national police right now, about 40,000, and they're going to grow a little bit. But as far as the integration of the Kurds, the peshmerga into the branches of the service, I think that's going to be a political decision and a process that they're going to have to engage in on that.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And Jarred?

Q Good afternoon, sir. Thank you for your time.

A follow-up on that last point, with the peshmerga. It seems -- you mentioned the COR meeting on Sunday, and it was reported here that they were supposed to pass the provincial election law and that kind of collapsed because of the Kirkuk issue at the last minute. Can you talk a little bit about the stumbling blocks with the Kurds, with the shifting, perhaps, political alliances with the UIA and what's happening on the ground? We always know two steps forward, one step back, but do you see this trend -- them actually being able to work this thing out or that we're heading to a climax, or what's the situation?

ADM. DRISCOLL: Well, it's -- I'm from Chicago, and you know, I've seen some interesting politics in my time growing up in Chicago. And this is what you're seeing right now, some no-kidding, hard-knuckle political wrangling going on. And quite frankly, as messy as it is, it's exactly what we're hoping for.

You know, we are -- we have moved from a year ago to -- you know, from extreme violence, trying to settle differences between the various groups and

parties, to a political process where they're actually, you know, going at, you know, for long lengths to try to resolve very difficult issues. And as you all know, the Kirkuk issue is about as -- you know, it's a Gordian knot and it's going to have to be solved. And I think we're at the point now we're they actually going to get it and wrestle with it.

So in terms of trying to predict which way it's going to go, I would never venture that guess. But I am very, very encouraged by the fact that Speaker Mashhadoni has called them in. They're going to wrestle with it on Sunday. All parties, really, I think, have an interest in solving this now, because as they move forward with the elections and as they move forward with solving the Kirkuk issue, you know, it's going to be very beneficial to the country in terms of moving forward economic development.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir.

Andrew.

Q Sir, good afternoon. Andrew Lubin from U.S. Naval Institute's Proceedings and also the new website, Get the Gouge.

Sir, let's go west a little bit out to Anbar, if we can. A couple weeks ago, I was talking to RCT-5. And they indicated that the biggest issues out there were criminals. Matter of fact, the last gunfight they were in, they caught some guys bringing crystal meth and cocaine.

Are those missions now the type of thing that the Marines and coalition troops want to get involved in?

And if I could follow up at the same time, Governor Sami has managed to postpone the handoff of Anbar province -- (inaudible) -- documents.

Is this a fledgling democracy? Are we running into a problem where they're trying to feather the nest for their own purposes?

ADM. DRISCOLL: Well, first one, on the turnover of control, you know, that was set for early in the month. And everybody had agreed they were going to sign on the dotted line.

Truly the weather that day was nasty. I mean, I call it, when the sandstorm kicks up, you look outside, it looks like Orange Tang in the sky.

(Cross talk.)

Q I was there. I know. I was trying to get there. I was stuck in Kuwait. I couldn't get up because of the sand.

ADM. DRISCOLL: Yeah.

And so what that did is once again it opened the door for some more horse trading, if you will, some more bargaining. And that's exactly what, you know, the governor, with perhaps also the director of police there and some political parties, started trying to get a better deal if you will. And also I think it's an indicator that the political process in Anbar is maturing, that you're having political parties now, you know, kind of juxtaposing for positions of power, as they anticipate these provincial elections.

So I take it, you know, it's a good sign. They're once again engaged in a political process. It's not pretty. And there's a lot of, you know, a lot of discussion.

And they're going through a very difficult thing that it took, you know, our country a long time to figure out. And that's states' rights. And who can control what? Who has authority in terms of forces and things like that?

These are, you know, critical issues for a growing democracy. And it took us a long time to figure it out with our Constitution. You know, we're talking, you know, decades to figure out the states' rights. And so you know, I'm hopeful that Anbar is going to switch here and go PIC to the Iraqis. But it's going to take a while.

Q Is there any handoff currently scheduled? Or are they still horse trading?

ADM. DRISCOLL: They're still negotiating, between the government of Iraq and the local governor, on when the actual date is going to be. I'm confident it's going to be in the near future. But they still are negotiating.

Q Okay.

ADM. DRISCOLL: In terms of the drug smuggling and whether that's a mission we want to get into, you know, in Anbar, there's still a viable, lethal al Qaeda threat. And that is really the focus of the security forces out there.

Smuggling as you know though is an integral part of what, you know, al Qaeda will use as a resource for funding its terrorism.

So you know, I can't really make a direct connection between al Qaeda and the drug trade, but al Qaeda does get resources from -- from cross-border operations to fuel its insurgency.

So yes, the Marines are involved, very much involved, in securing those borders and interdicting people coming across those borders that shouldn't be doing it and actually supporting the Iraqis, the Iraqi army, the Iraqi border patrol police that are actively engaged in doing that. And they've done a great job, quite frankly. A lot of the rat lines, if you will, that have been used in the past by the smugglers, you know, especially the Syrian facilitators there, have been closed down.

Q Well, had there been any incidents with al Qaeda in Iraq? Was it more smuggle ring incidents? The inference from RCT-5 was that it was simply these were smugglers, these were criminals. He says it's not ideological; they're just gangsters.

ADM. DRISCOLL: Well, once again, you know, we've got to take it up to a little higher level. You know, the terrorists, especially when we -- when we apply General Petraeus's anaconda strategy, are -- you know, have got to get money in order to -- to -- to fuel their -- their activity. And the anaconda strategy -- one of the -- the tenets is to continue to cut off, if you will, those external sources of revenue that the terrorists use in order to fund their activities. And so as this becomes more and more effective, as we cut off funding coming from Syria, through Syria; funding coming from countries like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait; as that -- as those countries make an effort to -- to

curtail that and money gets tight in al Qaeda, in the country, they have got to turn to criminal activity to resource their -- their agenda. And in fact we see that throughout -- throughout the country, that the terrorists do use criminal activity, extortion, intimidation, theft, graft, corruption, to -- to -- to survive, basically. And so there's internal sources and external sources of financing.

You know, like I said, though, I -- I don't -- really can't make a connection between the drug trade and al Qaeda. I haven't seen any evidence of that. But -- but once again, if -- if they're out there interdicting smuggling routes, they're probably going to come across some of those guys, because, as we all know, you know, Iraq is a crossroads, and traditionally and historically there's been a lot of smuggling that's gone through this country. Q Okay, thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: And Bruce.

Q Admiral, Bruce McQuain with QandO.net. You've touched on Sadr City and Basra in previous answers, but I was wondering if you could sort of give us a more detailed current look at the military, political and security situations in those two places.

ADM. DRISCOLL: Absolutely. Right now in Sadr City -- in Baghdad, and Sadr City in particular -- what we're seeing is the Iraqi police, really, staying in the neighborhoods, creating the conditions necessary for us to support the Iraqis as they improve the quality of life of the individuals there.

You know, the first step was to, first of all, institute the rule of law. In Sadr City, as you all know, there was no rule of law. It was the special groups criminals that were enforcing their own version of the law on the citizens of Sadr City. The prime minister said that's unacceptable, we can't have a, you know, separate army within Sadr City launching rockets indiscriminately, killing innocent civilians and extorting people. So he went in with the Iraqi army, and they now have control of the neighborhoods.

But to be successful, we have got to meet the needs of those people in Sadr City. And there's a huge effort going on right now to do that. The coalition forces are supporting the Iraqis, but you know, I can't tell you how much effort is spent now ensuring the sewer system and the water system is working in that neighborhood -- a big effort by the coalition, a big effort by the Iraqi government to invest in quick fixes and then also look at the long-term fixes to meet the needs of the people in Sadr City and Baghdad as well.

You know, when we first went in there, it was kind of emergency resource funding with water bottles and Meals Ready to Eat. But then now they're looking at, okay, let's -- small business loans, commanders using their CERP fund to repair damage done, to restock inventories, to start the businesses back up and get the clinics and the schools open, those kind of things, which you can do in a couple- of-month period. And then the long-term, which we're focused on as well, is power generation, sewage, water, health -- hospitals, those kinds of things that take a longer investment.

MR. HOLT: All right. Had a couple other folks join us late. Who else is with us?

Q Hi. It's Paul McLeary from Defense Technology International.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Paul. Do you have a question?

Q Hey, Admiral, how are you?

MR. HOLT: Go ahead.

ADM. DRISCOLL: Good. Thank you.

Q I have a question about the concerned local citizens movement. I'm wondering where it stands now; how many Iraqis are involved, what processes are in place to try to get these guys in the IA or in the IP, or, you know, where the Iraqi government stands on this. I know they have been dragging their feet a little bit about incorporating these guys into the security services.

ADM. DRISCOLL: It's a great question because it's really a key issue here. You know, the coalition supports the Sons of Iraq, Abna al-Iraq, the Awakening groups, if you will, because they have done a -- you know, a stand-up job in helping first in Anbar and then the rest of the country, in helping the security process really move along. And as you all know, they're the local police, if you will. They're the local eyes and ears for the security forces, and oftentimes they're the first point of contact. When a suicide bomber tries to get through a checkpoint or tries to get into a neighborhood, they're the ones that often bear the brunt of the attack. So the coalition and General Petraeus are very keen on ensuring that they're taken care of.

Obviously, as the security improves, there's less and less need for that kind of role. And as the Iraqi security forces gain in capability, once again, the need goes down.

So, as you mentioned, there's about 17,000 that have transitioned already to the Iraqi security forces. There's 2,500 that have gotten jobs in the various ministries. But there are still issues with transitioning Sons of Iraq, both Sunni and Shi'a, to these various security jobs. Many of them, you know, don't really want to go into the military, they want to have another job opportunity. And so what the coalition, working with the Iraqis, have done is they have come up with a training process by reopening some of the vocational schools that were closed down in the last 10 or 15 years, and providing training for these individuals in things like carpentry, plumbing, welding, these kind of trades, and then the coalition will give them a set of tools -- a welding kit or a carpentry kit -- and let them go out and start earning their living. This has been a successful program, getting these people through.

We've also set up a voucher system. Many of them do want to join the Iraqi police or the Iraqi army but they cannot pass the literacy test. So we've set up a system where we'll pay for these individuals to go and get their third- or sixth-grade reading certificate that will allow them to pass the entrance exam to become part of the security forces.

So we're very much engaged, with supporting them and making sure they transition. And it's part of the political calculus here that everybody's watching. And we want to make sure that these people are taken care of.

You know, their casualty rate is three or four times higher than the coalition casualty rate. And they've done a great job in helping the Awakening and then, you know, the security situation.

Q Quick follow-up.

These training programs: Is the American military funding this, or is the Iraqi government?

ADM. DRISCOLL: Currently the coalition is funding most of that. But the Iraqis are putting money into the program now. They're budgeting money to take over and also to expand the program.

Q Thank you, sir.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

Anyone else.

Q This is Jonas Hogg with the Ball Gunner.

MR. HOLT: Oh, yes. Go ahead.

Q Well, Admiral, thank you very much for your time. My question sort of, I guess, runs to politics.

Obviously closer relationship with Iran, probably not really what the U.S. is after right now, as far as Iraq-Iran. So is there worry that a growth in power, from the al-Sadr political bloc, might push for a closer Iran alliance, might orient, try to orient Iraq politics more to Tehran and away from Washington? And if so, how would that hamper U.S. factions in the region?

ADM. DRISCOLL: Well, I think that the realization here by the coalition is that, you know, and we've said this many times, Iran and Iraq should have, you know, a healthy relationship.

They share a very long common border. They, you know, there's a common religion. And they have great economic interest. There's huge money that goes across that border in the form of trade and tourism, with the pilgrimages and such.

So there should be a normal, healthy relationship. President Maliki has asked the Iranians, you know. You can import tomatoes. You can import all the goods you want. But don't import rockets and things like that.

He has asked the Iranian leadership to control what's coming across that border. And they have the capability of doing that. He wants to have a normal relationship and has said that he kind of expects that. The Iranians, if they're going to have this relationship, are going to have to make some decisions in terms of the way ahead.

With respect to Sadr and the Sadr trend, they have made a pledge that they are going to become part of the political process.

And they are going to be dedicated to helping the people of Iraq. And they have said that they will not attack Iraqi security forces. And they want to participate in the political process. I think that everybody's encouraged by that, because that's what we are -- we are trying to do. We are trying to encourage them to be participants in that process.

In terms of how they're influenced -- you know, if Sadr's influenced by the Iranians, you know, that's this political question I really can't answer.

But we're encouraged by the democratic process. The Sadr trend said they want to participate. I think Prime Minister Maliki has demonstrated that he is interested in having a normal two- way relationship with the Iranians and all other neighbors here in the region.

MR. HOLT: All right. Thank you very much. And we're about of time here. Thank you, folks, for joining us here.

Admiral Driscoll, do you have any closing comments for us, or closing thoughts?

ADM. DRISCOLL: Just -- it's encouraging here -- I've been here for about nine months now for this tour. I was here in 2003 as well. And the difference is dramatic. I know you've probably heard that a lot, but it truly is dramatic.

And what really is the key, I think, that -- when I talk to my Iraqi friends and I'm out there -- you know, a good example would be Route Irish, which is the route that goes from BIAP International Airport over here to the International Zone. And it used to be, you know, the most dangerous road in Iraq. And what we're seeing today as we go down Route Irish -- last week I was just amazed. You've got billboards, you've got signs up, you've got all the reconstruction going on. They put up guardrails and make it a -- you know, a nice boulevard, and what a change. I think, if you haven't been here in a while -- and you, you know, had to go on Route Irish before with all your body armor on, and it was a very dangerous process. Now there's a renovation and a beautification process going on.

And I think that's an indicator that -- that, you know, progress is definitely being made. Security is improving. There are still threats here that we're focused on, but it's a very encouraging time now that we're kind of shifting into the political/economic development phase of the counterinsurgency.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much for joining us here for the DOD live Bloggers Roundtable. Rear Admiral Patrick Driscoll is deputy chief, MNF-I Strategic Communications Division.

Thanks for joining us, and we look forward to speaking with you again, sir.

ADM. DRISCOLL: I hope we can do it soon. And thank you all for your time.

MR. HOLT: Thank you.

Q Thanks, Admiral.

Q Thanks very much. Have a good one, Admiral.

END.